The Conquest of Knowledge

THE GREAT Rishi, Bhrigu, shining in splendour, sat on the summit of Mount Kailas, and Bharadwaja questioned him:

“Who made the world?
How wide is the sky?
Who gave birth to water? To fire? To the wind? To the earth?
What is life?
What is good?
What is there beyond the world?”

And so on. Great were the questions and great must be the Rishi who could answer them all!

But Bharadwaja’s mind was the mind of a man who asks and asks ever and again, and never knows enough.

The child is the supreme questioner, he is always asking, “What is this? What is that? How is it made? What makes this thing move? What makes the lightning flash? Why are there tides? Where does gold come from? And coal? And iron? How is a book printed?...” And many more questions besides.

Both children and men ask questions. They also reply. When we know something, we can answer questions. We can teach, we can spread knowledge.

What shall we learn? What shall we teach? Shall we try to learn everything that has happened throughout the ages? Shall we attempt to learn every word that man can pronounce?

In the poem of the Mahabharata, the following words are used to describe the various kinds of arrows shot by the Pandava brothers and other warriors: sara, ishu, sayaka, patri, kanda, vishikha, naracha, vishatha, prushatka, bhallaka, tomara, ishika, silimukha, anjalika. We certainly do not need to learn all these...
names for arrows. And there are many other names of things that we do not need to learn.

We speak of the news: we think of shipwrecks, murders, robberies, quarrels, lawsuits, wars, fires, concerts, weddings, funerals and thousands of other things that we read of in a few minutes and forget about immediately afterwards.

We open the Koran and at the head of the chapters of this sacred book we read the word “News” and immediately we think of shipwrecks, murders... but wait!

The Prophet Mohammed was neither a frivolous person who took pleasure in news of evil deeds nor a gossip who taught nothing noble. Let us read the beginning of the chapter on “News”:

In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.
Of what are they speaking together?
Of the great news.
Are they disputing about it?
No, but they wish to know.
Surely, they will know.
“Have we not made the earth as a bed?
And the mountains as tent-pegs?
Were you not created in pairs?
And have we not made you sleep for your rest?
And made the night for a mantle?
And the day to earn your bread?
And built above you the seven firmaments?
And set there a burning light?
And made showers of water fall from the brimming clouds
To bring forth grain and herb everywhere
And gardens thick with trees?”

Thus the Prophet kindled hope in the hearts and minds of men and made them think of greater things, things that have a lasting
beauty, things that teach man how noble is the world of life.

So we agree that there are words and things and certain kinds of news that are not worth hearing and repeating. But other things, on the contrary, are worth hearing and repeating, even though it may cost us much time, trouble and effort to find them out.

Man’s power lies within his thought. The limbs, the hands that are so skilful, are the slaves of his thought which decides and directs.

And since the human race first dwelt on earth, how great have been man’s conquests over Nature!

We can see this power pictured in the tale of Rama’s crossing over the sea.

When he reached the shores of India, and learned that his dear wife Sita was a captive in the island of Ceylon, he prepared to cross the waters. Vast was his army, but it was made up of monkeys and bears. How could they cross the turbulent waters?

Rama’s intelligence was profound, his sagacity keen and his heart full of courage.

First he spoke gently to the old Ocean and said:

“Great Sea, I beseech you, let my army pass.” But after he had waited three days, there was still no reply from the waves.

Then Rama called his brother:

“Lakshman, bring me my bow and arrows. I have wasted my words on this sea, just as a man wastes good seeds by sowing them in sand.”

Rama, the divine hero, shot an arrow into the deep waters and the shaft gave a fiery pain to the ocean, and all the fish were full of fear. Then the spirit of the ocean took the form of a Brahmin who knelt before the Lord with a golden dish full of jewels as an offering.

The Ocean clasped the lotus-feet of Rama and said:

“Great Lord, forgive my sin. I am like my kin of the air, the earth and the fire. They are heavy and slow and so accustomed to power that they do not answer the call of a Lord like you. No
Words of Long Ago

hero before you has ever made me obey his will. In you I see my
master. Do what seems good to you.”

Lord Rama smiled:

“Tell me,” he said, “how my army may cross over your
realm of waves and storms.”

“My waters,” said the sea, “will bear on their breast the
rocks which your soldiers will throw on them and in that way a
bridge will be built between India and Lanka.”

Rama turned to his army:

“Let the bridge be built,” he said.

“Glory to Rama,” shouted all the warriors.

They uprooted trees and rocks and even great cliffs, and
brought them to the two master-builders, Nala and Nila. And
Nala and Nila fastened the wood and stone together so that
everything floated firmly on the surface of the sea. Then the
army marched across it.

Rama sat on a mountain of India and watched the countless
troops moving across the bridge.

Just as Rama forced the spirit of the ocean to obey him,
so does man’s thought, the glory of humanity, conquer the sea,
and many other things besides. Man masters the wind, since
he makes it blow his sailing ships and turn his windmills. He
conquers the ice and the snow, for explorers have travelled to
the frozen lands of the North Pole and the South Pole and have
climbed the highest mountains. He conquers the beasts, for all
over the world he slays the animals that are a danger to him
and his family: lions, tigers, wolves, snakes and even sharks.
Although he has less power over the great ocean, he has made
his strength felt on land. And while he has rid himself of the
animals that are harmful to him, he has kept and bred the
animals that are useful to him: the ox, the horse, the sheep,
the elephant, etc.

But all this is the conquest of things by his hands and by his
tools and weapons. And hands and tools and weapons are the
servants of his thought.
The Conquest of Knowledge

Man conquers by knowledge. And he conquers knowledge: he asks and asks again and again, and perseveres until he really knows.

Some men of whom history tells are known as conquerors: Alexander the Great who conquered Western Asia and Egypt, Julius Caesar who conquered France and England, the emperor Baber who conquered the North of India, Napoleon who became for a time the master of Europe.

But there are other ways of being a conqueror.

You also can be a conqueror. There are things in the world which need to be known and learnt. Ask, seek, learn and conquer. Then you can call yourself a conqueror.